Massage Therapy in the 1940s and the College of Swedish Massage in Chicago

Patricia J. Benjamin

What was the field of massage therapy like in the 1940s when the American Massage Therapy Association took root? What was the background of those graduates of the College of Swedish Massage in Chicago who met on August 16, 1943 to form an association of massage professionals? What is our heritage from those early years?

The College of Swedish Massage in Chicago, birthplace of the American Association of Masseurs and Masseuses (original title of AMTA) in 1943, was typical of the massage therapy training schools of that time. A look at the school, its faculty, and its curriculum through its 1940s catalog provides a glimpse of the profession in those post-World War II years. It also sheds some light on the issues confronting the early American Massage Therapy Association, and the forces that helped shape its character.

The School

The College of Swedish Massage evolved from the National College of Massage and Physiotherapy founded in 1906. In the 1940s, the College was located in downtown Chicago just north of the Loop shopping district, and near Michigan Avenue. The school catalog from that time describes Chicago as "the city of opportunity and an important center for teaching all important branches of the healing arts and sciences". The facilities were the most up-to-date and "no expense has been spared to make this the best equipped school of its kind in the world".

The day-time course of study in "scientific massage" ran for about twelve weeks, from 9:30 am to 2:00 pm every day except Saturday. Evening classes were offered three times a week from 7:00 pm to 10:00 pm for those who worked or had other day-time obligations. There was also a correspondence course, in which students living outside of Chicago could study classroom subjects through the mail and then come to Chicago for practical instruction.

The Faculty

Three faculty members were listed in the 1940s catalog. Their credentials exhibit a mix of backgrounds from regular medicine and natural healing, or what some today would call alternative medicine.

Esther C. Swanson was the Dean of the College in charge of all instruction in the 1940s. She joined the College faculty in the early 1920s. Dr Swanson was a graduate of the Royal Central Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, and as such, was quite familiar with Ling's Medical Gymnastics as it had evolved by the early twentieth century. She was also a Graduate Nurse, a Graduate Physio-Therapist, and a licensed Doctor of Chiropractic in the State of Illinois.

Dr Swanson had taught massage to nurses in various hospitals in Chicago including the Chicago Memorial Hospital, Augustana Hospital, Grant Hospital, University Hospital, and the Mary Thompson Hospital for Women and Children. Her experience of being part of both regular and alternative medicine was not uncommon for those in the healing arts in the early part of the twentieth century, especially those in physio-therapy (healing through natural means).

E. M. Gibson was also a Doctor of Chiropractic, and a Doctor of Massage Therapy (DMT). She taught the massage and hydro-therapy courses at the College.

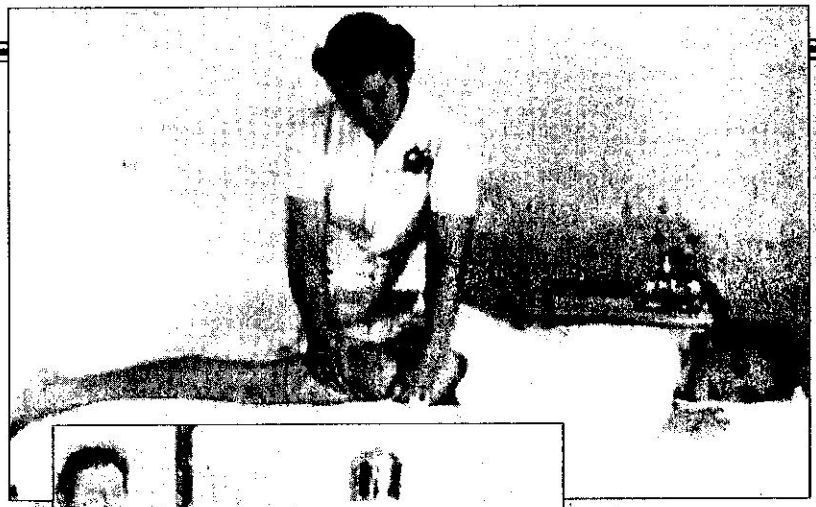
Carl B. Herrmann, a graduate of the Chicago College of Medicine, and a former president of the Chicago Anatomical Society, was the instructor of anatomy and physiology, ethical procedure and medical massage.

The Curriculum

The course of study at the College of Swedish Massage in the 1940s was a direct descendant of what was called the "natural method of healing" in the late nineteenth century, "natural therapies" in the early twentieth century, and later, "physio-therapy." Today's physical therapy is the application of these meth-

ods within regular medicine. Those methods not restricted to physical therapists by law can still be found in the practice of massage therapy, naturopathy and other natural healing forms.

The College catalog defines massage as "a term used to signify a group of systematic and scientific manipulations of bodily tissues which are best performed with the hands for the purpose of affecting the nervous and muscular systems and the general circulation." Modern scientific massage as taught at the College consisted of four types of movements or manipulations, i.e., stroking, kneading, vibration, and percussion. Medical gymnastics, or corrective exercise, was considered an important adjunct to massage.



Massage Technique as used in "reducing" work.

Application of the deep therapy lamp.

The "modern massage technician" or "massage expert" in the 1940s also made use of "supplementary techniques to make massage treatments beneficial and resultful to the fullest extent." These supplementary techniques included hydro-therapy, light therapy, and electro-therapy.

A 1940s catalog from the College of Swedish Massage lists the following subjects in their course in "modern scientific massage":

MASSAGE THERAPY —

General effects of massage, specific effects on various organs, manipulations, applications on different parts of the body, active and passive movements, general massage, contraindications, reducing massage treatment, facial and scalp massage, foot massage; massage treatment for medical conditions such as infantile paralysis (polio), neuralgia, sciatica, lumbago, gout, bronchitis, diabetes, rickets, and others; and obstetrical massage.

MEDICAL GYMNASTICS —

Also called Swedish Movements; assistive and resistive movements applied for corrective purposes.

HYDRO-THERAPY—

Local application of heat and cold, heating compress, poultice, vapor bath, medicated bath, saline bath, whole body pack, Spanish mantle pack, hot fomentations, shampoos, clay packs, Russian and Turkish baths, salt glow, hips and sitz bath, cabinet baths and others; hydro-therapy for conditions such as fevers, diseases of the stomach and intestinal tract, rheumatism, obesity, rachitis, diseases of the heart and spinal cord, mental diseases, and others; hydro-therapy in surgery. Also mentioned is the electric light cabinet bath.

LIGHT THERAPY —

Infra-red rays, ultra-violet rays, and various types of therapeutic lamps; applications for diseases; physical properties of and physiological effects of light; contraindications.

ELECTRO-THERAPY

Faradic current, interrupted galvanic and sinusoidal currents, long wave, short wave and ultra-short wave diathermy currents.

DIETETICS—

General principles of nutrition; effects of various vitamins and minerals.

The Profession of Massage

In the early 1940s, there was little regulation of the practice of massage and physio-therapy in the United States. According to the College of Swedish Massage catalog, only four states required licenses to practice, i.e., Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The College was clearly not in favor of more regulation. "It is the opinion of the officers and faculty of the College of Swedish Massage that state regulation is not necessary nor even desirable in this field."

"This field" included what have come to be known as physical therapy *and* massage therapy, which were not separate then as they are now. The distinction was made clear with the adoption of physical therapy licensing laws in all states. Those massage practitioners who worked in hospitals and with regular physicians were then licensed as physical therapists, and worked only under the direction of medical staff. This new breed of physio-therapists was trained in the university physical therapy department, and required an academic (usually bachelor's) degree, to practice. Those trained in vocational schools like the College of Swedish Massage, were grandfathered in under the new physical therapy licensing laws.

Many massage and physio-therapy practitioners did not wish to work in

the allopathic medical field or only with medical supervision. Many were more aligned with the tradition of natural healing methods, and the drugless healing systems of osteopathy, chiropractic, naprapathy, and naturopathy that had developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Those from the traditions of natural healing were more inclined to accept practices such as reflexology and polarity therapy, which were much maligned by regular medicine at that time as quackery.

Women's and men's classes in scientific massage technique.

Others worked in the health and fitness field in health spas, resorts, YMCAs and beauty salons. Although they might have felt more akin to regular medical science than to the drugless healers, these massage practitioners also did not fall under the physical therapy licensing laws since they did not work in medical institutions. Many wanted to keep their independence in any case, especially those with their own private clinics and practices.

I think it safe to say that the owners and faculty of the College of Swedish Massage in the 1940s were trying to walk a fine line between keeping their credibility with modern medicine and honoring their heritage in natural healing. At the same time, they hoped to retain their independence by opposing any type of regulation.

In an apparent attempt to distance the massage profession from other healing arts considered "radical", and possibly those being called "quackery", scientific massage was portrayed as unique in the field of the healing arts and sciences. "Unlike many health fads, which are more or less radical departures from accepted practices, massage is not a separate or specialized field of medicine in itself."

One gets the feeling from reading the catalog that there was a desire to reassure regular doctors that massage therapists were not out to establish their own brand of medicine via natural healing methods. "...because the Masseur and Masseuse do not diagnose ailments nor prescribe specific treatments, that being the function of the doctor, there is no conflict with the medical profession."

The subsequent licensing of physical therapists in the late 1940s and 1950s effectively split "the field" which the College had trained people for in earlier times, i.e., a field focused on natural methods of healing, which encompassed both the medical, and health and fitness realms. It probably seemed unacceptable to them at the time that there could be two sets of laws, one for physical therapists working within allopathic medicine, and one for massage therapists working independently. It probably seemed better to avoid regulation altogether.

For the Problems of "Modern Living"

The 1940s catalog emphasizes that massage is not only used as a "curative agent," but has many other uses arising from "modern living." It was thought at the time that most middle-aged people were not "strong enough physically to take strenuous exercise", and that massage "offers a splendid substitute, since it is said that a thorough massage treatment is the equivalent in exercise of a five-mile walk, without producing fatigue".

Another aspect of "modern life" addressed through massage is the "ever increasing nervous tension and strain, particularly among business and professional men and women such as lawyers, doctors, salesmen, executives, political leaders, actors and actresses." Massage is seen to "relieve nervous tension, and to pep up the system".

A common belief about massage at the time was that it helped reduce fat, or "cellulite" in today's jargon. The catalog notes that "The constant quest for beautiful figures among women, and trim waistlines among men, has caused thousands to turn to massage for aid in attaining good body contour".

Also mentioned are the job opportunities for graduates in professional and amateur sports. "Many college and professional football, baseball and hockey teams have massage experts in their training departments to take care of minor injuries, sore muscles, sprains and aches resulting from competition." The current field of athletic training grew out of this tradition in massage and physio-therapy.

Men's drill class in medical gymnastics.

View of a class room where students were taught massage therapy.

Careers in Massage

In the January 1948 issue of *Achievement*, the newsletter for graduates of the College of Swedish Massage, there is an article about the many career avenues open to trained massage operators.

"Graduates of the College of Swedish Massage, both men and women, find many ways open to a useful and profitable career after graduation... Many graduates go into institutional work such as those positions offered to graduates of the college by the Sacred Heart Sanitarium, Alexian Brother Hospital of Chicago, Mercy Hospital of Manistee, Michigan...

"Some accept jobs at famous resorts, of which The Lakeside Health Resort of Lakeside, Michigan is an outstanding example, as well as the famous Rose-Dor Farms, just outside of New York City.

"Many women...find that widely-known beauty salons such as Elizabeth Arden, Helena Rubinstein, or Helena Sjolin are anxious to hire them...

"Industrial physiotherapy opened up an entirely new field for graduates of the College. Such firms as Armour & Co., or Bell Aircraft Company have employed SCM graduates in their physiotherapy sections. Many of the larger department stores now have added physiotherapy services to their employee medical facilities...

"A great many male graduates are now employed as trainers for such famous athletic teams as the Chicago Cubs, Detroit Lions, Chicago Stags and many others, both professional and amateur. Well known health conditioning salons are always happy to hire graduates.

"In addition, there are many who start a business of their own by building a private practice."

Our Heritage from the 1940s

The College of Swedish Massage closed its doors many years ago, and the field of massage therapy has changed in some significant ways since the 1940s. There is more diversity today in approaches and disciplines, and in the content of entry level training programs. We no longer promote massage for fat reduction.

The separation of physical therapists into their own field is complete, and some forms of hydro-, electro-, and light therapy once practiced by all "massage experts" are restricted to physical therapists by law. Massage therapy as a separate field is now regulated in 19 states, largely independent from control by regular medicine.(See "Legislative Time Capsule", p. 79.)

In other ways, the field remains very much the same. The affinity of massage therapists for natural methods of healing and more holistic approaches is still evident. Today massage is promoted as a complement to exercise programs (instead of as a substitute), and its benefits for reducing the effects of stress are still highly touted. Health clubs, beauty salons, resorts, athletic teams, and private clinics continue to be major places of employment. We are still struggling to establish our credibility, and last but not least, massage therapists are still concerned about retaining the right to practice independently. ■

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Special thanks to longtime AMTA member, Camille Houde, who provided the catalog upon which this article is based. Camille graduated from the Chicago College of Swedish Massage in 1947. He is featured in the Hands-On, AMTA Profile, Summer 1990.

THE COLLEGE OF SWEDISH MASSAGE

CATALOGUE

100 EAST OHIO

Dr. E.C. Swanson, Dean